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# PEACE AND PALAVER: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN PRE-COLONIAL WEST AFRICA[1]

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## I. *Customary Law as International Law*

NEITHER man nor his institutions can be solitaries, and the history of both oscillates between periods of peace and war, with intermediary phases of tension and negotiation. Guarding peace, the one extreme, and mitigating war, the other, stands law, that body of rules, whether enacted or customary, which is accepted by a community. So far as individuals within a community are concerned, conduct in the intermediate ground is regulated by the law of that community. But tension and negotiation between communities, as states, subordinate bodies, or their individual members, fall within the province of 'international law', while the whole field constitutes that of 'international relations'. Both international law and international relations are concepts evolved in Western Europe, where they have been the subjects of much study, but as yet they have been hardly touched upon by students of the indigenous institutions of pre-colonial Africa and of their histories.

Despite this neglect and despite the unwritten nature of law in Africa, and of many of the historical sources, there is abundant evidence of formal relations at the highest governmental levels between the different peoples of West Africa in the pre-colonial period, and there is even some evidence of the existence of an inter-states system. The object of the present paper is to examine these relations and to ask whether characteristics can be discerned, especially in the practice of diplomacy, which would enable a comparison to be made with the international system elsewhere. It will be necessary to preface this undertaking with a brief examination of the nature of law in tropical Africa in order to determine whether it is justifiable to speak of 'African law' or 'African customary law', and whether this law was sufficiently widespread and generally accepted as to be termed, within West Africa, 'international law'. Finally, external influences on the practice of international relations in West Africa will be considered, these being, first, Islamic, affecting primarily the countries of the interior, and second, West European, affecting primarily the coastal states.

[1] A version of this paper was presented to seminars at the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, and at St Antony's College, Oxford during a study leave in the Michaelmas Term 1972 generously granted by the University of Lagos, and the writer is grateful for the useful comments and criticism which he received on these occasions. He also thanks Professor Abdullahi Smith of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and Dr R. C. C. Law of the University of Stirling for their help. A book which came to the writer's attention only after completing the article but which is very relevant to it is Ragnar Numelin, *The Beginnings of Diplomacy* (Oxford, 1950).

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The definition of 'law' which is offered above—'that body of rules, whether enacted or customary, which is accepted by a community'—and which is based on that given by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, attempts to combine the Austinian or 'command' theory of law with later theories emphasizing its social character. It would thus include the unwritten customary law which prevailed over most of Africa in pre-colonial times and which, Elias claims, 'forms part and parcel of law in general'.[2] There was (and is) naturally much diversity in the customary law applied and acknowledged by the many different peoples of the continent. Nevertheless, lawyers have argued that these differences are far from outweighing certain recurring features which distinguish African law. Allott[3] has analysed the most important of these features: the traditional and popular character of the law; basic similarities in judicial procedure, whether in the courts of chiefs or in the arbitral tribunals of villages, clans or households; the role of the supernatural; patterns of government which almost always rest ultimately on the consent of the governed; and the role of the community in the interpretation and enforcement of law. Thus, he concludes, African law is 'a unity in diversity'. Elias, in a contribution to a symposium on 'Sovereignty within the Law',[4] develops this theme, concluding that: 'in large areas of Africa there (had) emerged broadly similar rules of customary law, which makes it possible to speak of the existence of a universal body of principles of African customary law that is not essentially dissimilar to the broad principles of European law'. He continues that this customary law 'shares with customary international law the characteristic that its validity does not depend upon any theory of sovereignty'.[5]

The existence of a widespread customary law was noticed by early European visitors to Africa, in particular by the Portuguese. Traders enjoyed, for example, the protection of law for the unwritten contracts, based on oaths and 'medicine', which they made with the local inhabitants. Conversely, they resented the application of West African law under which the property of a dead colleague, or their ships gone aground along the coast, were forfeit to the local ruler.[6]

Thus it seems that customary law, this 'unity in diversity', provided a bond between the different states and peoples of West Africa, and a form of international law by which their relations with each other could be regulated. The evidence which will be cited about these relations derives, as would be expected, mainly from those states which possessed a centralized, or at least a central, authority. The diversity which existed

[2] *The Nature of Customary Law* (Manchester, 1956), v.

[3] *Essays in African Law* (London, 1960), 64–71.

[4] 'African Law' in A. Larsen, C. W. Jenks and others, *Sovereignty within the Law* (New York, 1965), 210–22.

[5] Ibid. 220.

[6] See, for example, W. Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545–1800* (Oxford, 1970), 87–8.

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between the political systems of West Africa[7] will serve to emphasize the importance of customary law in bridging the gaps between them. It must also be remembered that a number of apparently small-scale societies were linked by associations, such as the Poro of Sierra Leone and Liberia, which performed political, including diplomatic, functions on behalf of the whole group.

## II. *Inter-African relations*

The ends to be achieved in international relations are universal—or so nearly so as to raise no substantial question for the historian. They are above all the questions of peace and war, and then such practical matters as the conclusion of treaties, the establishment of frontiers, the development and protection of trade, and the payment of tribute. The means by which these relations are conducted and regulated, on the other hand, have to be adjusted to changing circumstances. Yet the employment of diplomatists to represent and to negotiate on behalf of a state or society seems to be a central and nearly constant feature, and it usually follows from this that diplomatic forms become established among neighbours, and immunities recognized. If common patterns were to be discerned in this area of political life among the peoples of West Africa, this would provide a further argument for the essential unity of the customary law over a large part of Africa and for its claim to constitute international law.

Many instances occur in the early European writings on West Africa in which the officials of African governments engaged in foreign affairs are described as 'ambassadors'. Other words used are 'messenger' and (especially on the Gold Coast) 'linguist', and occasionally, perhaps with a recollection of the evolution of Western diplomacy, 'herald'. Most of the earliest references are to the exchanges between the coastal states and Europeans and between the states of the West Sudan and the Muslims of North Africa. These will be considered in a later section of this paper, the intention being first to focus attention on the indigenous form of diplomacy as it operated in relations between states within the area. Perhaps the earliest reference of this kind is in a letter of 1539 from three Portuguese missionaries at Benin to their king, John III. The missionaries write that the Oba (king) of Benin had the 'habit of ill-treating and imprisoning all ambassadors of kings who send messages to him', treatment which he had accorded to the envoys of the two small coastal states of Ardra and Labedde.[8] Another ecclesiastical report, written by the Prefect of a group of Italian missionaries on the island of St. Thomas to the Sacred Congregation at Rome, states that in 1691 relations between Benin and the

[7] The Yoruba kingdoms alone are characterized by a great diversity of political forms: see Robert Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (London, 1969), chapters VII, VIII and XI.

[8] A. F. C. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485–1897* (London, 1969), 73. The letter is translated in full in Ryder, 'The Benin Missions', *J. Hist. Soc. Nigeria*, II, 2 (1961), 258–9.

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Itsekiri kingdom of Warri were so strained that 'they (were) not exchanging ambassadors',[9] which suggests that in the usual course there was regular diplomatic liaison between the two kingdoms. References to the activities of ambassadors occur throughout the works of Dapper, Bosman, Snelgrave, Norris, and Dalzel.[10] In the last three, the ambassadors of Oyo, the most powerful of the Yoruba kingdoms, and of Dahomey figure prominently. In one account it is related that before embarking on his invasion of the kingdom of Whydah in 1727—the beginning of his drive to extend his rule to the coast—Agaja of Dahomey sent an ambassador to Whydah with a request for 'an open Traffick to the sea side'.[11] Elsewhere Snelgrave relates how in 1730 Agaja 'sent Embassadors with large Presents' of coral 'together with one of his handsomest Daughters' to the Alafin (king) of Oyo. They succeeded in obtaining for their master 'an advantagious Peace', which the Alafin confirmed by sending one of his daughters in return as a wife for Agaja.[12]

The states on and in the hinterland of the Gold Coast were also engaging in considerable diplomatic activity in the eighteenth century, as appears from the reports of contemporary European observers. In 1714, for example, the Ashanti sent a delegation to compose differences between John Kabes, the merchant prince and virtual ruler of Komenda, and the Twifo. The alliance formed against the Ashanti by neighbouring states on the death of the Asantehene Opoku Ware (*c.* 1750) was cemented by diplomatic means, the Fante taking the initiative. In 1777 a new Asantehene, Osei Kwame, sent ambassadors to the King of Wassa asking him to ascertain whether the Fante were willing to accept the presents usually made on a king's death—an interesting example of negotiation through a third party.[13] For the nineteenth century, evidence is still more abundant, though the influence of and interaction with Europeans is more intrusive. A late example of indigenous diplomacy from the Yoruba country is the part played by embassies sent by the Ekiti and Ijesha kings to other monarchs in the formation of the anti-Ibadan coalition of 1878 known as the Ekitiparapo.[14]

Occasionally some of the West African sovereigns sent their representatives to reside abroad, rather than merely on visiting embassies, the

[9] Ryder, *Benin*, 113.

[10] O. Dapper, *Description de l'Afrique* (Amsterdam, 1636); W. Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (London, 1705); J. Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea* (London, 1732); W. Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and of the Slave Trade* (London, 1734); R. Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee King of Dahomy* (London, 1789); A. Dalzel, *The History of Dahomy* (London, 1793).

[11] Snelgrave, *Account*, 5–6.

[12] Ibid. 135. See also I. A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours, 1708–1818* (Cambridge, 1968), 91–2, for further details of this settlement.

[13] K. Y. Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast, 1600–1720* (Oxford, 1970), 124; J. K. Fynn, *Asante and its Neighbours, 1700–1807* (London, 1971), 87, 124.

[14] See S. A. Akintoye, *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland, 1840–1893* (London, 1971), 146.

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earliest known example occurring in the late seventeenth century. This and other forms of continuous diplomacy will be discussed in the third section of the article.

That a large part of this early diplomacy concerned trade is not surprising, for trade and politics go together in the foreign relations of a people as much as in their internal affairs.[15] Nothing so clearly indicates the interdependence of the peoples of West Africa as the long-distance trade which linked the coastal and forest states with the savannah lands far to the north. The bulk of such trade seems, moreover, to have been in the hands of the more centralized states,[16] whose governments were of a nature to distinguish between foreign and domestic policies. The trade in kola nuts, a product of the Guinea forest much in demand by the Muslims of the West Sudan, illustrates the connexion between commerce and diplomacy.[17] An important part of the trade passed from Ashanti through Gonja, Dagomba and Borgu to Hausaland, and was under the supervision of resident representatives of the importers. Lovejoy writes of these Hausa and Hausa-speaking officials—who after the 1830s were restricted by the Kumasi government to Salaga and markets north of the Volta—that they 'served as diplomatic and commercial representatives of the trade network to local states',[18] and indeed their functions seem to have been comparable with those of the early European consuls—for example, those of Venice in England and the Levant.[19]

The status of those chosen to carry out diplomatic duties in West African states varied, but in every case they must have been among those close to the rulers of the country, often members of the royal household. Sometimes they were the great men of the land; even princes of the royal family might be sent on mission, as in the Congolese embassy to Rome in 1514.[20] On one occasion at the end of the seventeenth century, the kings of Denkyira and Ashanti sent some of their wives as ambassadors to each other, a courtesy which was said to have provided a cause or pretext for war, as the Asantehene, the great Osei Tutu, claimed that his Denkyiran brother had misbehaved towards one of the envoys.[21] In other cases, slaves might be used. This was apparently so in the embassy which the Ashanti proposed to send to England in 1821.[22] Nevertheless, it seems unlikely

[15] The importance of trade in the development of Western diplomacy is stressed by Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (Oxford, 1939; 1963 edition), 50.

[16] J. Goody, *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa* (Oxford, 1971), 39–42.

[17] P. E. Lovejoy, 'Long-Distance Trade and Islam: the case of the nineteenth century Hausa kola trade', *J. Hist. Soc. Nigeria*, v, 4 (1971), 537–47.

[18] Ibid. 539.

[19] G. Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (London, 1955; 1965 edition), 63–4, cautiously admits the place of commercial agents in the history of diplomacy. He concludes, 'For Venice, anyway, a case might be made for her consuls having been the precursors of her resident ambassadors'.

[20] F. Bontinck, 'La première "Ambassade" Congolaise à Rome', *Études d'Histoire africaine*, I (1970), 48–9.

[21] Bosman, *Description*, 75.

[22] J. Dupuis, *Journal of Residence in Ashantee* (London, 1824), 168.

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that Dupuis had been misled in his belief that the ambassadors were men of rank and influence, since the more important palace slaves at Kumasi, as in other kingdoms, could be accurately so described. In Abuja, whose governmental system was based on that of the Habe kingdom of Zaria before the Fulani jihad, the leading official known as the *Bakon Bornu*, or 'envoy to Bornu', was a household slave of the ruler, as were other important 'messengers'.[23] Other diplomatists might be of humble though free birth, having achieved distinction by their talents, as in the case of Agyei who, after beginning life as a salt carrier on the Volta, rose to be second linguist of the Asantehene in the early nineteenth century; being 'always employed in difficult foreign palavers', he was described by Bowdich as the 'Foreign Minister' of Ashanti. An earlier example of this type of official was Matteo Lopez, who led an embassy from Allada to King Louis XIV of France. According to the Sieur d'Elbée, his position was equivalent to that of Secretary of State, and he had served several times as ambassador to Benin and Oyo. 'The office of interpreter here', d'Elbée added, 'is very considerable, but the least mistake is as much as their lives are worth'. Similarly, the linguists at Kumasi were required to 'take fetish to be true to each other, and to report faithfully'.[24]

Diplomatists generally carried credentials in the form of a fan, a staff, a cane, or a baton, or wore special clothing, like the black caps which, according to Bosman, ensured 'an effectual free pass everywhere' for the 'Tie-Ties' of the Fante. The ambassadors of king Tegbessou of Dahomey to Bahia in 1750 were offered Portuguese clothes by the authorities there, but preferred to appear at their audience with the Viceroy in their own magnificient garb. Ashanti ambassadors were provided by their king with splendid clothes, which on their return from a mission they surrendered to 'a sort of public wardrobe'. The Poro officials who enforced their arbitration among the Mende chieftaincies went masked as 'devils', impersonating the guardian spirit of their society, while among the Dan of the Ivory Coast and modern Liberia, special peace-making masks were worn for palavers—'large masks with animal-like features and a moveable lower jaw'.[25]

Possibly the most highly organized diplomatic staff in pre-colonial West Africa was that of the Alafin of Oyo. This was the group of household slaves known as the *Ilari*, also called 'half-heads' from the custom of shaving one side of their heads, into which a magical substance was

[23] M. G. Smith, *Government in Zazzau, 1800–1950* (Oxford, 1960) 43, 55. Some of these slave messengers were also eunuchs.

[24] J. Astley, *Voyages and Travels* (London, 1746), II, 68, 73; T. E. Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* (London, 1824), 248–9, 257. Agyei is the subject of Story V in *Stories of Strange Lands* (London, 1835), 152–79, by Mrs R. Lee, formerly Mrs Bowdich.

[25] Bosman, *Description*, 194; Bowdich, *Mission*, 294; M. McCulloch, *Peoples of Sierra Leone* (London, 1950), 29–33; A. Adandé, *Les Récades des Rois de Dahomey* (Dakar, 1962), passim; A. A. Y. Kyerematen, *Panoply of Ghana* (London, 1964), 92–6 and illustrations, 94–7; F. Willett, *African Art. An Introduction* (London, 1971), 184–5.

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inserted.[26] Numbering some hundreds of both sexes, each male paired with a female, the *Ilari* performed multifarious duties, but whereas the junior had administrative and menial tasks within the palace, the senior males acted as a bodyguard to the Alafin and as messengers to the world outside. All bore titles, some of which had a significant relation to their calling, as for example: *Oba l'olu* ('the king is supreme'), *Oba ko se tan* ('the king is not ready'), *Kafilegboin* ('stand fast'), and *Madarikan* ('do not oppose him'),[27] and as credentials they carried fans embroidered in red and green. A somewhat similar body of royal messengers existed in Dahomey, the *Wensangun*. They too were 'half heads', and it has been supposed that their organization was based on that of Oyo. Travelling in pairs so as to ensure the accuracy of the messages which they memorized, these athletic diplomatists were required to bring their oral despatches all the way at the run, so that stations were provided on the road from Whydah to Abomey, the capital, where they could be relieved by relays of others.[28]

The practice of diplomacy requires a measure of immunity for the person and possessions of the diplomatist, and at the least his protection against arbitrary detention.[29] Immunity in turn seems to be rooted in the respect accorded to strangers by nearly all communities other than the most primitive. African hospitality and the honour done to strangers were remarked upon by most of the early European travellers, who themselves received ceremonious and cordial welcomes from the rulers of the countries they visited.[30] The same sources show that important African strangers were received with at least equal *empressement* as the white men. In one account, the king of Quoja (at Cape Mount) sent to ask visiting ambassadors

[26] Rev. S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (ed. O. Johnson) (Lagos, 1921; 1957 edition), 60–3, 67, 468. See also R. C. C. Law, *The Oyo Empire: the history of a Yoruba state, principally in the period c. 1600–c. 1836* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Birmingham, 1971), 75–80.

[27] See Johnson, *History*, 211, 468–70, 531, 627. The first reference describes the peace conference at Ikoyi between the Alafin and his rebellious chiefs during the last years of the old Oyo kingdom. The Ilari who represented the Alafin was Kafilegboin. This was taken by the chiefs to imply that the Alafin had no genuine wish to reach agreement, and they broke off negotiations. The other references concern the objection by Governor Carter of Lagos in 1893 to dealing with Oba ko-se-tan, who had taken part in abortive negotiations to end the Yoruba wars in 1881. The Alafin sent Oba l'olu in his place. Johnson, 72, apparently errs in describing the Oyo chief known as the Laguna as 'the state ambassador in critical times'.

[28] Dalzel, *History*, 123, 154, 171; W. J. Argyle, *The Fon of Dahomey* (Oxford, 1966), 68–9. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 118, writes that king Tegbesu (1740–74) introduced Oyo court institutions, including officials corresponding to the Ilari, into Dahomey.

[29] Mattingly, *Diplomacy*, 42–4, writes that although various forms of immunity had been established in Europe by the fifteenth century for the ambassador and his suite, there were so many exceptions that an international law of diplomacy cannot be said to have existed before the middle of the seventeenth century. E. Nys, *Les Origines de la Diplomatie* (Brussels, 1884), 33–4, considers that the law became so exaggerated in the seventeenth century as to diminish the principle of national sovereignty, a development for which he blames Grotius.

[30] For example, see Barbot, *Description*, 128, 370, 396.

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to delay their entry to his capital so that a proper welcome could be prepared; the reception took place in an open hall lined with soldiers.[31] Bosman says that such visits were in general 'accompanied with several odd Ceremonies', that soldiers were drawn up in the market place and visitors greeted with 'a dismal Military Noise'.[32] The king of Juala (presumably Joal, some seventy miles south of Cape Verde) was so insistent a host, and so much brandy and palm wine were drunk at his receptions, 'that it is much if the king or the envoy comes off sober'.[33] The Ashanti were outstanding in their respect for the usage of diplomacy, and Claridge claims that they were never known to fire on a flag of truce or to murder an ambassador.[34]

Despite all this, cases of harsh and cruel treatment of ambassadors occurred. The imprisonment of ambassadors by a sixteenth century Oba of Benin has been mentioned above. Bosman refers to the murder in the seventeenth century at 'Great Ardra'—Allada—of an ambassador of the Alafin of Oyo, an act which precipitated the invasion of Allada by an Oyo cavalry force, and on several occasions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Ashanti complained of the ill-treatment accorded to their representatives by the Fante.[35] In 1878, an envoy sent by the ruler of Imesi-Igbodo to assure Ibadan that his town would not join the Ekiti-parapo, was murdered by his own townspeople on his return home.[36] But these cases seem all to be recognized as exceptional. As elsewhere the career had its hazards, but on the whole ambassadors and foreign visitors enjoyed honour and protection in the kingdoms of West Africa.

Nothing corresponding to the fiction of extra-territoriality (a fairly late development in Western diplomacy)[37] seems to have existed in West Africa, although in Yorubaland and elsewhere criminals and others who incurred the wrath of the authorities sought safety in recognized sanctuaries, which in at least one case included the king's palace.[38]

Associated with the treatment of diplomatists and other visitors was the observance of protocol, a subject which only those unacquainted with the history and practice of international relations would dare to dismiss as trivial. As among European courts, there was great variety in the etiquette of the different kingdoms of West Africa, but here again a

[31] Dapper, *Description*, 266 (with an engraving). [32] *Description*, 126–7.

[33] Barbot, *Description*, 56. The same king, when receiving the French factor at Goree, removed the hat worn by an accompanying friar, refused to return it, and eventually sent a young slave in exchange.

[34] *A History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti* (London, 1915; 1961 reprint), I, 186.

[35] Bosman, *Description*, 396–8; Dupuis, *Journal*, 21, 254, 256; Fynn, *Asante*, 111.

[36] Akintoye, *Politics*, 89, 94. It is also alleged that Fabunmi of Imesi Igbodo habitually executed the messengers sent by the Are Latosisa of Ibadan.

[37] This was precipitated in the sixteenth century, according to Mattingly, *Diplomacy*, 266–7, by the embassy chapel question after the Reformation, and was explicitly stated by Grotius in *De Jure ac Pacis*, II, XVIII, para. 4, no. 8. The principle was challenged by the ruling of a London divorce court in May 1972 (*Daily Telegraph*, 12 May 1972).

[38] For a note on Yoruba sanctuaries, see Robert Smith, 'Ijebu, 1892' in M. Crowder (ed.), *West African Resistance* (London, 1971), 198.

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pattern can be discerned. For example, it was usual for kings to converse only indirectly with their visitors and subjects, a custom which Ibn Battuta noticed at the court of Mali in 1352 and misinterpreted as unmannerly. In Dahomey, the two highest officials, the *Migan* and the *Meu*, spoke respectively as intermediaries for the king to the people and for the people to the king. The Meu, as *chef de protocole*, also took charge of all strangers and supervised public ceremonies. According to Dalzel:

> The King [of Dahomey], and all his subjects, receive strangers with the most remarkable courtesy. Ambassadors, from whatever state, are not put to the necessity of learning the Dahoman etiquette. Every one salutes the Sovereign, according to the fashion practised in his own country.[39]

At the small court of Quoja, special privileges were allowed to the ambassador of the king of Folgias, to whom Quoja was tributary, and also to the Dutch representative, who alone was allowed to eat at the king's table.[40] Ambassadors, like rulers, often had to rely on or chose to speak through interpreters. Nobody familiar with the usages of modern West African society will be surprised at the emphasis on precedence, a subject closely touching a diplomatist's interest. A vivid, though late, example, occurs in Johnson's *History of the Yorubas* when, during negotiations in 1890 by the colonial government at Lagos to end the Yoruba wars, the Alafin of Oyo objected to his representative being given no higher status than the representatives of Ogbomosho and Iwo, towns formerly within his dominions, and refused to send his *Ilari* to an important meeting. A spokesman remarked that the Governor of Lagos 'ought at any rate to know what is due to a Sovereign or he would not have been selected to represent one'.[41]

Evidence as to the general conduct of foreign affairs is meagre, but there is some trace of the common theory that such matters are the primary concern of the executive arm of government. According to Johnson, writing of Oyo, 'the control of foreign affairs [was] vested in the King',[42] and any consultation with the council known as the *Oyo Mesi* only implied that the Alafin was uninterested in the matter under discussion. On the Gold Coast, a palaver about foreign affairs was proverbially described as 'a bringing together of stools'.[43] Yet only in a military despotism, such as Dahomey, can it have been possible for a ruler to embark on major moves in foreign policy without the advice of at least his greater chiefs. In metropolitan Oyo, for example, military power was exercised by the *Oyo*

[39] Dalzel, *History*, viii; Argyle, *Fon*, 64, 72. Snelgrave, *Account*, 39, writes that courtiers whispered their messages for the king 'into the Ear of an old Woman, who went to the King; and having received his answer, she returned with it to them'. This was probably one of the female officials known as the 'mothers' of the higher male officials, and who formed (according to Herskovits, cited by Argyle) a part of the royal system of control.

[40] Dapper, *Description*, 267. [41] *History*, 592–3. [42] Ibid. 513.

[43] Casely Hayford, *Gold Coast Institutions* (London, 1903), 37. The proverb is given as: *wori bobo ingwa.*

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*Mesi*, whose leading member, the *Bashorun*, commanded the army of the capital, so that it is difficult to accept Johnson's view of the royal prerogative in this respect. In Ashanti, after what Wilks has called the 'Kwadwoan revolution' in central government during the eighteenth century, the political influence of the aristocracy is said to have declined, and that of the Asantehene to have become preponderant. Nevertheless, Bowdich, who was well placed to assess the issue, considered that 'The constitution requires or admits an interference of the Aristocracy in all foreign politics, extending even to a veto on the King's decision; but they watch rather than share the domestic jurisdiction'.[44]

The problem of communication with strangers led to the employment in negotiation of those skilled in foreign tongues. As probably in diplomacy everywhere, there was a tendency for the interpreters to become the negotiators. Between Europeans and Africans, the medium of communication seems from the sixteenth century onwards to have been most often Portuguese. Ruy de Pina wrote of the ambassador who in 1486 accompanied d'Aveiro from Ughoton, the port of Benin, to Lisbon, that he 'was a man of good speech'—presumably he learnt some Portuguese on the voyage—'and natural wisdom'.[45] Roman Catholic missionaries and slave traders spread the use of the language, and this must on occasion have facilitated intercourse between Africans themselves. In the eighteenth century, Barbot writes of the interpreter of the king of Sestro speaking 'a little *Lingua Franca* or broken Portuguese'. This language was used as late as 1854 when the British negotiated the Treaty of Epe with ex-Oba Kosoko of Lagos.[46] Another reference suggests that in the seventeenth century, at the onset of Oyo's imperial expansion, the Oyo language (or 'Yoruba proper') was preferred for some purposes in Allada to the local Aja.[47] Trading contacts spread the use of English and French on the coast in both speech and writing from the eighteenth century onwards and probably earlier,[48] while trade between the forest and the savannah led to the expansion of Hausa. The Fulani jihad of the early nineteenth century and the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate gave a great impetus to the speaking and writing of Arabic, a point which belongs to the next section of this paper.

No trace has yet been found of the development of a specialized vocabulary for the conduct of West African diplomacy, except perhaps in the use

[44] Bowdich, *Mission*, 252; I. Wilks, 'Ashanti Government' in D. Forde and P. M. Kaberry (ed.), *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1967), 212–13. G. P. Hagan, 'Ashanti Bureaucracy', *Trans. Hist. Soc. Ghana*, XII (1971), has traced the beginnings of the administrative changes beyond the reign of Osei Kwadwo, 1764–77, to that of Opoku Ware, *c.* 1720–*c.* 1750.

[45] Cited in Ryder, *Benin*, 30.

[46] Robert Smith, 'To the Palaver Islands: war and diplomacy on the Lagos lagoon in 1852–1854', *J. Hist. Soc. Nigeria*, v, 1 (1969), 21.

[47] Dapper, *Description*, 305.

[48] For example, see Antera Duke's diary in D. Forde, *Efik Traders of Old Calabar* (London, 1956).

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of significant titles for such envoys as the *Ilari* of Oyo.[49] The Poro, and doubtless other societies, did, however, use signs, symbols and allusive language in their internal communications, which must have served to keep secret their political dealings. On occasion, diplomatic communication took the form of symbolic messages conveyed, for example, by objects such as cowries arranged in a significant pattern, like the congratulatory message sent by the Awujale of Ijebu Ode to Oba Akitoye of Lagos after the latter's restoration in 1850.[50]

Like military operations—of which it is the peaceful counterpart—diplomacy requires the support of intelligence. By its nature, this is dark and hidden, and it is difficult to adduce evidence. Something, however, is known of the Dahomean agents, the *Agbadjigbeto*, instituted by the warrior-king Agaja. Snelgrave writes that Agaja, 'this politick Prince', was able through his spies to discover how much the great men and people of Whydah 'were divided, and that the King was only a Cypher in the Government', information which determined his invasion of that country in 1727.[51] In addition to gathering intelligence, the *Agbadjigbeto*, who were sent abroad usually in the guise of merchants, were also required to create the impression that Dahomean intentions were peaceful and then, on their return home, to manufacture suitable pretexts for subsequent aggression.[52] Another view, not an altogether convincing one, is that the main activities of the *Agbadjigbeto* amounted not to spying or propaganda in the ordinary senses, but to an attempt to undermine a possible enemy by magical means, such as burying 'medicine' in his towns.[53] In any event, intelligence was realized to be an important asset in international dealings, and the counterpart of the warmth with which foreigners were received in West Africa was the suspicion of any seemingly unusual actions or questions by them.[54] Rather oddly, this suspicion does not seem to have extended to the Muslims who were travelling about the region in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The conduct of international relations in Africa, like that of local palavers, was deliberate, patient and tortuous. This is evident from the

[49] In Yoruba, for example, the word *ajele* for the resident representatives of Ibadan was apparently adopted for this purpose. It was applied in the mid-nineteenth century to the British consuls at Lagos and later to British Residents and District Officers. In Yoruba-language newspapers today, *olotu* ('head') is generally used to translate 'consul', while 'ambassador' or 'enovy' is *ashoju*, a title used by chiefs who have the special duty of representing their king. State messengers were previously known as *Iko*. (The writer thanks Dr W. Abimbola for confirming this information.)

[50] K. Little, 'The Political Function of the Poro', *Africa*, XXXV, 4 (1965), XXXVI, 1 (1966). G. W. Bloxham, 'Exhibition of West African symbolic messages', *J. Anthrop. Inst.*, XVI (1887), 295–9. This and other examples are now in the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford (case 24).

[51] *Account*, 9.

[52] Akinjoghin, *Dahomey*, 63, citing Le Herissé and Hazoume.

[53] Argyle, *Fon*, 83–4.

[54] Bowdich, *Mission*, 67–8, describes the close watch kept on his mission in Kumasi. He also mentions (294) that 'a shrewd but mean boy . . . in the commonest capacity and meanest attire' was attached to Ashanti embassies to spy on the ambassador.

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accounts of European participants and observers. 'It is the custom of the Court of Ardrah (Allada) to make Strangers wait a long Time for an answer', complained the Sieur d'Elbée in 1670.[55] Some of the delays were due to religious inhibitions; according to Dupuis, there were only some 150 or 160 days in the Ashanti year which were considered propitious for diplomatic business. Dupuis's conclusion was that: 'In short, the Ashantees are slow, and I believe, cautious in cabinet; they are slower, however, in warlike movements'.[56] Bowdich relates how one Ashanti ambassador, Tando, attempted to regain the royal favour by successfully settling a dispute with Wassa, and was thereupon further disgraced, the king explaining that 'no man must dare to do good out of his own hand, or perhaps he would find he did bad, as Tando had done, in spoiling a palaver which he and his great men meant to sleep a long time'[57]—an African version of Talleyrand's advice to the young diplomatists in his office, 'surtout pas trop de zêle'. Flattery—for example, the attribution of 'strong names'—was a familiar diplomatic technique, and the giving of presents was obligatory, both to ease negotiations and as a token of friendly relations. Dahomey attempted on more than one occasion in the eighteenth century to avert the hostility of Oyo by sending 'great presents', and Allada, threatened by Dahomey, retained the support of Oyo by directing a stream of presents to the Alafin.[58] Gifts were also exchanged annually between Oyo and other independent states such as Bussa and Nupe. An unusual feature of royal audiences at Benin, reported by Barbot, was that the presents brought by Europeans were not shown to the Oba until after the visitors had withdrawn.[59] Presents took many forms, cloth and coral being favourite items; among the more unusual were the 'beautiful pair of young leopards in a bamboo cage' provided for the Ashanti embassy of 1821 to take to George IV of England, and the great horn made from an elephant's tusk which the Asantehene sent to the Ya Na of Dagomba about 1830.[60]

The aim of diplomacy being to carry out the policy of a government by means of negotiation, its achievements are usually expressed in either informal understandings or specific treaties, though it is not always possible in pre-colonial West Africa to distinguish between these. Examples of the former may be taken from Dahomey, whose conduct of negotiations in the eighteenth century, backed as it was by a Prussian authoritarianism and power, reached a high level of efficiency. According to Dalzel, King Kpengla's envoys were able to bring about a war in 1786 between his

[55] Astley, *Voyages*, II, 66. See also Rodney, *Upper Guinea*, 195–6.
[56] *Journal*, 166, 213.
[57] *Mission*, 123.
[58] For examples, see Snelgrave, *Account*, 58; Dalzel, *History*, 157.
[59] *Description*, 370. But this custom, even if accurately reported, had certainly died out by the latter part of the eighteenth century.
[60] Dupuis, *Journal*, 174; A. W. Davies, 'The History and Organization of the "Kambonse" in Dagomba' (typescript *c.* 1935), 5 (kindly lent by Professor J. D. Fage). The leopards but not the ambassadors reached England.

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enemies at 'New Ardra' (Ajase) and their former allies the Weme.[61] A few months later Kpengla succeeded in similarly separating the Ajase from their protectors at Oyo.[62]

Evidence about inter-African treaties, as opposed to understandings or ententes, is more abundant. The peace treaties of 1730 and 1748 between Oyo and Dahomey (the second concluded through the good offices of the director of the Portuguese trading fort at Whydah) are well known; they aimed at a comprehensive settlement and laid down the annual tribute to be paid to Oyo by Dahomey.[63] Other examples are the alliances concluded by the Fante against the Ashanti in the eighteenth century, the treaty of Jarapanga in *c.* 1830 between Ashanti and the defeated Dagomba,[64] and the anti-Ibadan alliance of the second part of the nineteenth century. The Sokoto Caliphate provides an example in the treaty which it concluded at Togu in 1866/7 with the independent Hausa state of Kebbi, bringing a peace of eight years between these old enemies.[65] In a different category are the small-scale treaties (*ikul*) between sections of the Tiv. A typical *ikul* imposed meticulous prohibitions on bloodshed and on sexual relations between members of the contracting groups, and rules requiring 'almost exaggerated hospitality' when members of one group visited another.[66]

Treaties in West Africa were entered into solemnly and were usually regarded as binding and sacred. 'African customary law', writes Elias, 'shares with customary international law acceptance of the principle *pacta servanda sunt* as basis for assurance of a valid world order.'[67] The binding nature of treaties was enforced by the swearing of oaths, which were often formidable operations; among the Tiv, for example, they entailed the killing of an elephant and a slave, followed by the preparation of sacred emblems and potions and the mingling and consumption of the blood of the parties.[68] Treaties were also confirmed by the giving of hostages, sometimes members of royal families, and by dynastic marriages, as in the case above of the exchange of daughters between the Alafin of Oyo and the king of Dahomey in 1730.[69] In appropriate circumstances the parties might resort to devices such as the planting of trees to demarcate a

[61] *History*, 180–6, 191. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 167, treats Dalzel's allegation of Dahomean intervention with some scepticism. [62] Dalzel, *History*, 193–6.

[63] Snelgrave, *Account*, 135; Dalzel, *History*, 74; Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 90–2, 123–4.

[64] Fynn, *Asante*, 86, 105; Davies, 'Dagomba', 5.

[65] R. A. Adeleye, *Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria, 1804–1906* (London, 1971), 69.

[66] L. and P. Bohannan, *The Tiv of Central Nigeria* (London, 1953), 30–1.

[67] In Larsen, *Sovereignty*, 222.

[68] Bohannan, *Tiv*, 30–1. Barbot, *Description*, 338, also refers to the mixing of blood in the solemnization of contracts.

[69] Snelgrave, *Account*, 135. For examples of hostages, see Barbot, *Description*, 298; Davies, 'Dagomba', 5; Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, 170. In this connexion, a maxim by A. Folarin, *The Laws and Customs of Ebgaland* (Lagos? 1939), 54, is significant. Writing of contract (*adehun* in Yoruba), he says: 'There is no agreement without consideration, in money, kind or otherwise.'



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frontier, which concluded a war between Oyo and Benin, probably in the sixteenth century.[70] Yet treaties could be broken in Africa as elsewhere, as was the case with that of 1730 between Oyo and Dahomey. Doubtless Africans were as ready as others to fall back on the doctrine that their treaties held an implicit reservation that they remained in force only so long as conditions were unchanged—the *clausula rebus sic stantibus* of European lawyers—and according to Bosman, there was a regular and solemn procedure in Guinea by which absolution from an oath could be obtained.[71]

## III. *Islamic and West European influences; written record and continuous diplomacy*

It remains to consider the influence on the system of international relations in pre-colonial West Africa of two alien cultures, those of Islam and of Western Europe, and then the progress made in association with those external influences towards the development of a written record and a permanent diplomacy. These last provide the most important criteria for the emergence of a diplomacy fitted to contend with the political problems of the age immediately preceding the colonial age, problems already exacerbated by improved communications and more efficient weapons of war.

The introduction of Islamic doctrine into West Africa from the eleventh century onwards was accompanied by that of Islamic law, the two aspects being indeed hardly distinguished. In much of Africa, especially the forest states, this law seems to have been carefully accommodated to the fundamental precepts of the customary law,[72] and with customary law it served to foster unity among different peoples. Rules of warfare received special attention in Islam,[73] and a degree of uniformity was introduced in the Islamized states of the western Sudan in such matters as the disposal of booty and the treatment of captives. As regards international relations, Islamic theory defined these in terms of the relations between believers, the members of the community of faith, all equal before God, and non-believers, who were either *dhimmi*, 'people of the Book', such as Jews and Christians, or 'pagans'.[74] 'The concept of the state as an independent political institution is just as alien to Islamic as to African thought', writes Trimingham.[75] In practice, however, Islamic governments were con-

[70] Smith, *Kingdoms*, 41–2. [71] *Description*, 149.

[72] This is to go less far than J. S. Trimingham, *Islam in West Africa* (Oxford, 1959), 147–8, who writes of Islamic laws as being generally subordinate to African customary law. It is not clear if he intends this to apply even to such Islamized states as the Fulani emirates of Hausaland.

[73] M. Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore, 1965), passim. See also Usman dan Fodio's handbook to the jihad, *Bayan Wujub al-hijra*, translated and edited by F. H. el-Masri (Ph.D. thesis, Ibadan, 1968).

[74] In the Sokoto Caliphate, all foreigners who submitted to the protection of the Caliph and yet retained their own customs, including Hausa pagans, were considered *dhimmi*: see M. Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (London, 1967), 67.

[75] *Islam in West Africa*, 139.

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fronted with political questions which divided even members of the faith, and often along national or tribal lines, as for example in the contest between Sokoto and Bornu in the early nineteenth century.

In the Muslim world, non-resident accredited agents were widely used for the conduct of diplomatic negotiations both within and without the Islamic community. Rules for the behaviour of non-Muslim emissaries in the *dar-al-Islam* and of Muslim emissaries in the *dar al-harb* were laid down in detail by the jurists.[76] So far as the international relations of Muslims in pre-colonial West Africa are concerned, however, the only clear examples of embassies seem to be those sent from one Muslim state to another. The diplomacy of Bornu illustrates these relations. According to a French surgeon writing about 1680, an alliance was established between Mai Dunama and the Ottoman pasha of Tripoli in 1555, followed about a decade later by an exchange of embassies during the reign of Mai Abdullah. Under the famous Mai Idris Aloma, who did much to replace customary law in Bornu by an Islamic juridical system, these contacts with the Ottoman Empire expanded, and in 1577 an embassy was sent to seek a military alliance at Istanbul itself. This seems to have failed, and in 1582 Idris sent an ambassador to al-Mansur, the Sa'dian Sultan of Morocco, with a similar proposal. An embassy to Tripoli in 1578 was reciprocated by the pasha, who sent gifts of horses and firearms. During the seventeenth century, embassies from Bornu continued to visit Tripoli,[77] and there is evidence of occasional diplomatic contact between Bornu and both Tripoli and Istanbul in the nineteenth century.[78]

The most important development in the handling of international relations in pre-colonial West Africa which is associated with Islam is the introduction of literacy, which enabled political records to be kept. Al-Bakri says of Ghana in 1067–8 that the king's interpreters, his treasurer and most of his ministers were Muslims, and the first evidence of writing in Arabic script in the area comes from soon after this time. There is then a gap between the inscriptions at Gao, which indicate communication between Andalusia and the Niger region about 1100, and the writings of Ahmad Baba, which reflect traditions going back to the fourteenth century.[79] Typical of the period before the Fulani jihad were the works known as 'Mirrors for Princes', of which the advice of Al-Maghili to the

[76] Khadduri, *War and Peace*, chapter XXI. Unfortunately he does not deal with diplomatic relations between the Muslim states.

[77] The paragraph is based to this point on J. O. Hunwick, chapter 6, 'Songhay, Bornu and Hausaland in the sixteenth century', 206–12, and R. A. Adeleye, chapter 13, 'Hausaland and Bornu, 1600–1800', 498, 502–5, in *History of West Africa*, vol. I (London, 1971), ed. Ajayi and Crowder. The French surgeon's evidence cited by Hunwick (as also by Barth) is from the *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie de Paris*, 3e serie, xi–xii, 1849, 252–9.

[78] B. G. Martin, 'Five Letters from the Tripoli Archives', *J. Hist. Soc. Nigeria*, II, 3 (1962), 350–72.

[79] A. D. H. Bivar and M. Hiskett, 'The Arabic Literature of Nigeria to 1804: a provisional account', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, London, XXV (1962), 105.

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king of Kano on *The Obligations of Princes* is an example. Unfortunately, little which would throw light on the day-to-day conduct of diplomacy seems to have survived from before the nineteenth century. Considerable information then becomes available about the inner working of the Sokoto Caliphate, especially the role of the Vizier and his chancery.[80]

Among the forest states, it is clear that by the time of the visits to Ashanti of Bowdich and Dupuis, in 1817 and 1821 respectively, a number of literate 'Moors' were resident in the capital. They were apparently mainly engaged in writing magical formulas for amulets, but according to Bowdich, a chancery had also been set up by them for recording 'the greater political events'.[81] These Moors—by whom are meant mainly Muslims from the islamized countries of Gonja, Dagomba and Mamprussi to the immediate north—had settled in Kumasi during the reign of the then Asantehene, Osei Bonsu, having been previously 'only visitors'.[82] Bowdich's 'Moorish secretary' had also 'resided some time at Hio', that is, at Oyo.[83] This is insufficient to suggest that records were kept by the Alafin's government, but there is evidence of some degree of literacy in Oyo in a report by a French trader that in or about 1787 he met ambassadors from Oyo on the Benin river who knew how to write and calculate in Arabic.[84]

Europeans arrived on the Guinea coast some three hundred years after the Muslims had made their first converts in the savannah, and from the end of the fifteenth century onwards, that part of West Africa within reach of the coast was in almost continuous contact with western Europe. A small part of this contact consisted in the steady trickle of African visitors both to the European settlements in Africa and to Europe itself, most of whom were charged with official business and can be termed, as they usually were by contemporaries, 'ambassadors'. The first visitor of this kind—as opposed to a few unfortunates who were taken to Europe against their will as curiosities—seems to have been the chief of Ughoton, the port of Benin, who accepted d'Aveiro's invitation to accompany him on his return to Lisbon after his exploratory visit in 1486. In 1514 the Oba despatched a second embassy to Lisbon, this time on his own initiative. The objects of the mission were several: to complain about the conduct of some of the Europeans now trading on the Benin river, to answer

[80] Last, *Sokoto*, passim, especially 92, 190–5.

[81] Bowdich, *Mission*, 90–1, 232, 296; Dupuis, *Journal*, 112, 229. See also I. Wilks, 'Ashanti Government', 218.

[82] For the identification of some of these Muslims, see N. Levtzion, 'Early 19th. Century Arabic Manuscripts from Kumasi', *Trans. Hist. Soc. Ghana*, VIII (1965), 99–119. According to Dupuis, *Journal*, 245, the previous Asantehene, Osei Kwame, had been deposed for planning the extension of Islamic practices in Ashanti.

[83] *Mission*, 296.

[84] The account, by J. F. Landolphe, *Mémoires*, ed. J. S. Quesné (Paris, 1823), vol. II, 85–8, is cited by Ryder, *Benin*, 224–5, and Law, *Oyo*, 78–9. Both Ryder and Law conclude that the men were probably northerners, perhaps Hausa. There is a reference to the presence of 'Malays', that is, Muslims, in Dahomey in Norris, *Memoirs*, 102–3.

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European complaints about the trading practices of Benin, to discuss the provision of Christian missionaries, and to ask for firearms. The two ambassadors, called 'Dom Jorge' and 'Dom Antonio' by the Portuguese, were probably themselves already Christians. Their embassy, which had little success, was followed by another in 1516 and yet another in or about 1540.[85] Meanwhile, in 1513 an embassy from the king of Congo had reached Lisbon, whence it proceeded in company with three Portuguese envoys (all men of rank who were fully accredited) to Rome in order to make an act of obedience to the new Pope.[86]

In the seventeenth century, the small kingdom of Allada provides two interesting examples of embassies to Europe. The first was sent by King Toxonu to Philip IV of Spain in 1658 to protest against the establishment of a French mission post at Whydah, which (in Akinjogbin's interpretation) ran counter to Alladan ambitions that European activities should be concentrated in their kingdom. The second embassy, of which an account was compiled by the Sieur d'Elbée who accompanied it, was sent by Toxonu's successor King Tezifon to France in 1670 to discuss trading difficulties at Allada. The ambassador, Matteo Lopez, had the honour of being received at the Tuileries by both Louis XIV and his queen, the latter conversing in Spanish while Lopez replied in Portuguese.[87] On the Gold Coast, envoys from the states there paid frequent visits to the headquarters of the European traders and occasionally to Europe. In 1612 two representatives of the king of Asebu carried out a successful mission to Holland, where they won Dutch support against the Portuguese, and in the 1660s an ambassador was sent to France by Komenda to ask Louis XIV to direct his traders towards that state.[88] Other examples of African-European embassies may be found in the history of Dahomey, which despatched four missions to the Portuguese at Bahia and Lisbon between 1750 and 1811.[89]

European contact with West Africa was maintained in pre-colonial times by missionaries and traders rather than by officials, and only a few instances can be adduced of the sending of diplomatic representatives from Europe to Africa. The earliest seem to have been the two ambassadors sent from Portugal to the king of Congo on separate occasions at the end

[85] Ryder, *Benin*, 31–2, 45–6, 48, 72.

[86] Bontinck, '"Ambassade" Congolaise', passim. Nys, *La Diplomatie*, 19, confirms that such embassies of obedience to a new Pope were especially ceremonious.

[87] Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 27–31. For the embassy to France, see d'Elbée's account in Astley, *Voyages*, II, 73–7. Johnson, *History*, 168, records that Obalokun, an Alafin of Oyo who probably reigned in the early seventeenth century, 'was said to be in friendly relations with the King of France [probably Portugal] with whom he had direct communication. It is said that the King sent 800 messengers with presents to that European sovereign, but that they were never heard of again.' There is no confirmation of the tradition.

[88] Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, 12, 67, 80; Fynn, *Asante*, 136.

[89] P. Verger, *Flux et Reflux de la Traite des Nègres* . . . (Paris, 1968), chapter VII. This also describes tentative attempts by the king of Lagos in 1770 and 1807 to make diplomatic contact with the Portuguese, and an embassy of 1810 from the king of Ardra (Porto Novo) to the Portuguese Regent at Rio de Janeiro.

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of the fifteenth century, Rui de Sousa and Simão da Silva.[90] The Portuguese also sent an embassy to the Fula king in Upper Guinea at the end of the fifteenth century, and two embassies to Mali, one about 1490 and the other in 1534.[91] Two prominent examples of much later date are the British missions to Ashanti led by Edward Bowdich and Joseph Dupuis in 1817 and 1821 respectively.[92] The latter, a member of the consular service who had filled posts in North Africa, was scornful of the blunders of his less professional predecessor who, he alleged, was 'unaccountably deficient in a knowledge of the usages of courts'.[93] More frequent were the missions from Europeans settled on the coast to the neighbouring African states. The Dutch and English, for example, sent either representatives from their own nations or local African employees to Ashanti, beginning with David van Nyendaal's visit to Kumasi in 1701.[94]

The object of these missions was usually to obtain trading concessions, though another common motive was to ask for military aid. Numerous agreements were made between the Dutch and the states of the Gold Coast in the seventeenth century. An informal trading arrangement with Asebu as early as 1598 was replaced by a definite agreement in 1656. The Dutch also made a military agreement with Fante in 1624, trading agreements with Axim, Accra, Jabi and Komenda in or about 1642, and a reciprocal military agreement with Fetu in 1688.[95] Another example of a formal commercial agreement was that signed between Benin and the Dutch West India Company in 1715, 'after endless delays and no less expense and labour', as the Dutch negotiator wrote.[96] The treaties signed by Bowdich and Dupuis with Ashanti both proved short-lived. The Ashanti were alert to any threat to their independence, as were other African states, such as Bornu and Sokoto in their treaties with Barth, the British emissary, in 1852 and 1853, and Sokoto and Gwandu in their treaties with the National African Company in 1885.[97] A diplomatic curiosity is the possibly forged treaty obtained by a German expedition in 1895 with Gwandu.[98]

The arrival of Europeans on the West Coast coincided with, and indeed partly resulted from, the emergence in Western Europe of the modern territorial state. This in turn was developing a new form of diplomacy as one of its most potent weapons of statecraft. The most prominent feature

[90] Mentioned by Bontinck, '"Ambassade" Congolaise', 37, 38.

[91] Rodney, *Upper Guinea*, 12, 80.

[92] *Mission* and *Journal*, both passim. See E. Collins, 'The Panic Element in Nineteenth Century British Relations with Ashanti', *Trans. Hist. Soc. Ghana*, v, 2 (1962), 79–144, and J. D. Fage, 'On the reproduction and editing of classics of African history', *J. African Hist.*, viii, 1 (1967), 157–61, for assessments of these two works.

[93] *Journal*, Part ii, xiii. Dupuis also criticizes his interpreter, a Fante who gave offence at Kumasi by his ignorance of 'diplomatic courtesy'.

[94] Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, 67–8, 119, 165; Fynn, *Asante*, 90, 95, 103, 107, 132, 144, 156–9.

[95] Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, 55, 57, 78, 184.

[96] Quoted in Ryder, *Benin*, 140–1.

[97] Adeleye, *Power and Diplomacy*, 121, 131–5.

[98] W. Markov and P. Sebald, 'The Treaty between Germany and the Sultan of Gwandu', *J. Hist. Soc. Nigeria*, iv, 1 (1967).

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was now the resident ambassador, an official whose origin lies in Renaissance Italy.[99] Together with organized chanceries acting as embryonic foreign offices, also probably originating in fifteenth-century Italy, the resident ambassadors made possible a continuous, informed and evolving foreign policy. The system was intended, as Mattingly puts it, 'to make diplomacy do the work of arms, to make the foxes masters of the lions', and was the counterpart of the standing armies of the nation-states.[100]

The new permanent diplomacy spread throughout Europe during the next three hundred years, until it was adopted by the Ottoman Empire at the end of the eighteenth century.[101] No effort was made during this time to introduce the system into West Africa, though the forts of the European trading companies had something of the character of standing embassies, and their directors were sometimes called upon to perform semi-diplomatic functions.[102] Then the abolition of the slave trade in the early nineteenth century caused the governments concerned to look for means of encouraging legitimate trade and repressing attempts to revive slaving. One of these means proved to be permanent representation. Perhaps the only positive result of Bowdich's treaty of 1817 with the Asantehene was the establishment of a British resident at Kumasi, and in the event he was soon recalled. An important step was taken by the British Government in founding the consulate of the Bights of Benin and Biafra in 1849, a post whose holders, far from confining themselves to consular duties, behaved as ambassadors and even embryonic governors.

The system of maintaining resident representatives abroad was not entirely unknown to the indigenous diplomacy of West Africa. At the end of the seventeenth century, the king of Denkyira appointed an official named Ampim as his resident trade representative on the coast. On his death at Cape Coast in 1698, the English company sent consolatory gifts to the king.[103] There are indications that the Alafin of Oyo appointed ambassadors to pay extended visits to, and possibly to reside in, Dahomey in the latter part of the eighteenth century in order to collect the tribute due to him under his treaties and to report any Dahomean military successes, so that he might demand a share of the spoil.[104] The Oyo government also stationed *Ilari* in Egbaland while it was tributary to them, a relationship which was probably broken towards the end of the

[99] Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, 66–76.

[100] Ibid. 10, 95, 146–7. Mattingly also (57–8) postulates a connexion between the development of mercenary armies, and consequently of wars more difficult for statesmen to control, and the development of permanent diplomacy.

[101] Khadduri, *War and Peace*, 286. The Sultan admitted permanent representatives from the major powers to his capital in the sixteenth century, but it was not until 1792 that he appointed his own resident ambassadors to Paris, London, Vienna and Berlin.

[102] For the intervention of Bazilio, director of the Portuguese fort at Whydah, in negotiations between Oyo and Dahomey leading to the peace of 1730, see Akinjogbin, *Dahomey*, 91.

[103] Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, 69, 159.

[104] Argyle, *Fon*, 25, citing Dalzel, *History*, 175, 205, 213. These references suggest but do not confirm that there was a permanent mission.

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eighteenth century. Similarly, the Oba of Benin placed agents in such peripheral parts of his territory as the Yoruba town of Akure, where they were known as *Balekale* or *Abilekale*. The Ashanti maintained residents for the collection of tribute in Dagomba and other neighbouring states, and also sent trade representatives to Accra and Akuapem. The Oyo system of residents was extended by the successor state of Ibadan, their representatives in the outlying parts of their empire being known as *Ajele*.[105]

Many of these examples, it will be noted, apply to relations between a dominant power and a tributary. Nevertheless, they are all approximations to continuous diplomacy. They seem, moreover, to have arisen spontaneously out of the indigenous political and economic situation. On the other hand, it was mainly in order to keep in touch with the British traders, and therefore under European influence, that the Ashanti in the early nineteenth century stationed a representative at Cape Coast. He was entitled by Dupuis their 'Captain general' and was accorded considerable respect as 'the organ of his government'. When the holder of the post, 'a young athletic man', died in 1820 (allegations of poisoning being naturally made), a nephew of the Asantehene was appointed in his place, and made his entry into Cape Coast 'with a degree of military splendour unknown there since the conquest of the Fantee by the King' and accompanied by a suite of some 1,200 persons.[106]

A form of continuous diplomacy particularly prominent in West Africa, and almost certainly of indigenous origin there, was the representation of a state or community abroad by chiefs or officials of the foreign state. An example already cited is that of the Bakon Bornu at Abuja. Barth writes of there being 'a sort of consul of Bornu' at the court of the Sultan of Bagirmi in 1842, and similarly of a consul of Bagirmi, the *Mestrema*, at Kukawa. In Dagomba, a chief of the Ya Na's court, the *Kunkuma*, was concerned with the interests of Ashanti, and in most Hausa towns a Serkin Nupe looked after Nupe affairs.[107] The system has some resemblance to that of the *proxenoi* in classical Greece, or to the occasional use in modern times of honorary consuls. A later development, which seems to have evolved from contact with the Europeans, was the custom at Badagry and Whydah of designating chiefs to guard the interests of European residents and visitors, usually merchants. Thus, for example, there are references to the 'French', 'Portuguese', 'Dutch', and 'English' chiefs at Badagry, and on his arrival there in 1850, Bowen, the American

[105] Smith, *Kingdoms*, 50, 162–3; Ryder, *Benin*, 21; K. Arhin, 'The Structure of Greater Ashanti (1700–1824)', *J. African Hist.*, VIII, 1 (1967), 76–7; Fynn, *Asante*, 121, 142; Akintoye, *Power Politics*, 98. Arhin maintains, unconvincingly, that the Ashanti presence in such places as Dagomba was 'not political'.

[106] Dupuis, *Journal*, xi, xiii, xviii.

[107] H. Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa* (London, 1857), III, 260, 405, 424; Davies, 'Dagomba'; private communication from Mr A. H. M. Kirk-Greene. The first *Kunkuma* was a hostage taken by the Ashanti after the treaty of Jarapanga, while the first *Mestrema* was a war prisoner of the Sultan of Bornu.

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missionary, was asked for presents by the 'American chief'. In nineteenth-century Dahomey, English visitors were the responsibility of a female official described as 'the English mother' and her male counterpart, while at Yola, the capital of Adamawa, the French agent Mizon was received by the Serkin Turawa, 'chief of the white men'.[108]

One general result of these diplomatic relations between West Africans and both the Muslims and the Europeans was the enhanced influence of the literate élite. In some cases these men belonged to royal or noble families, but they seem at least equally often to have been of humble birth. Examples of the latter are Agyei, the Ashanti linguist referred to above, and Pierre Tamata, the powerful French-educated Hausa secretary to the king of Porto Novo in the late eighteenth century.[109]

## IV. *A Summing up*

The evidence which has been given as to the existence and character of international relations between the peoples of pre-colonial West Africa, though scattered (in time and place) and selective, may still be held sufficient to support the unsurprising conclusion that neither on the coast nor in the savannah nor even in the deepest forest did these peoples live in isolation from each other. Secondly, it may show that these relations were generally conducted according to an indigenous system and in obedience to a customary law, both of which were widely accepted, comparable in many ways to what obtained in western Europe and elsewhere, and capable of assimilating without being essentially changed by external influences. It seems impossible to formulate any convincing correlation between the types of states and the degree of importance attributed by a government to diplomacy as a means of prosecuting its policy, but the practice of diplomacy was almost always associated with states whose governments possessed at least some elements of central power—another conclusion which may seem a platitude.[110]

[108] T. J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours* (Charleston, 1857), 99; C. W. Newbury, *The Western Slave Coast and its Rulers* (Oxford, 1961), 47; R. Burton, *A mission to Gelele, King of Dahome*, ed. C. W. Newbury (London, 1966), 32, 189; information (about Mizon) from Mr Kirk-Greene. See also Fynn, *Asante*, 121, for the three Ashanti officials posted to the Dutch, English and Danish quarters of Accra respectively in 1776.

[109] Verger, *Flux et Reflux*, 214–17. P. Labarthe, *Voyage à la Côte de Guinée* (Paris, 1803), 165, cites Pierre Tamata to bear out his warning against giving a French education to Africans, as this creates not friends but enemies for France.

[110] That in the early eighteenth century, at least, Africa (including West Africa) was not everywhere regarded as outside the world's state system is shown by the extension of Pufendorf's *Introduction to the History of the Principal States of Europe* of a fourth volume (probably by Jodocus Crull) dealing with Asia, Africa and America. C. H. Alexandrowicz, 'Pufendorf-Crull and the Afro-Asian World', *The British Year Book of International Law*, XLIII (1968–9), 208, writes that this was a logical expression of Pufendorf's ' "natural law" approach to the law of nations which is conceived as an inherently universal and non-discriminatory system of law'. (The writer thanks Mr J. E. K. Aggrey-Orleans for this reference.)

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The similarities of the West African to the West European system, especially as the latter was before the emergence of the nation state and of permanent diplomacy about the time of the Renaissance, are striking. Ambassadors were despatched to represent their sovereigns abroad; their work, although it had its hazards, was within the protection of the law; treaties were concluded and solemn sanctions provided to uphold them since, in Africa as in Europe, 'treaties are made to be kept'. There were also important differences. In West Africa international relations were systematized to a far less degree. Except in the Islamic states, there was little or no speculation about these relations. Diplomacy was eccentric and in some ways rudimentary. There seems to have been hardly any specialized vocabulary for the handling of foreign affairs; chanceries were common only in the Islamic states, and continuous diplomacy, although not unknown, was little practised. Yet despite such deficiencies, the West African system was usually able to meet what was required of it, and indeed it may be claimed of many of the peoples that they had a talent for diplomacy. The conquests of the Muslim Holy War and the European partition were to be made possible not so much by the diplomatic inadequacy as by the military incapacity of the African resistance. Finally, though the development of the indigenous forms of international relations was broken with the establishment of European colonies, these forms can still provide a tradition for the governments, foreign offices and foreign services of modern West Africa.

SUMMARY

International relations in pre-colonial West Africa were conducted in accordance with customary law, which exhibited broadly similar characteristics over a wide area. Trade and politics, linking the coast, the forest and the savannah, led to the development of diplomacy in the more centrally-organized states. Inter-African embassies enjoyed a degree of prestige and immunity comparable to that which protected European diplomacy, and a widely accepted protocol regulated negotiations. Treaties were concluded solemnly and sanctions were provided for their observance. Embassies were also sent to Europe and adjacent European possessions and settlements, North Africa and the Near East, and were generally received on a proper footing.

The indigenous system of international relations was affected by two major external influences. The first, that of Islam, notably contributed literacy, and led in the Islamized states and in Ashanti to the evolution of chanceries. It also introduced the distinction in international law and practice between Muslims and non-Muslims. The Muslim states exchanged embassies, Bornu, for example, maintaining intermittent relations with North Africa and Istanbul for three centuries. The second influence, that of Western Europe, spread the knowledge of European languages which, like Arabic, facilitated communication between West Africans themselves as well as with outsiders. The development of the resident embassy in sixteenth-century Europe was apparently not reflected in

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West Africa until the nineteenth century, but approximations to the system of continuous diplomacy did arise, probably independently. Diplomatic relations with both Muslims and Europeans tended to increase the influence in West African politics and society of the literate élite.

The indigenous system of international relations in West Africa was flexible and effective, and it seems that it was not so much diplomatic as military incapacity which allowed the Muslims to overthrow governments there and the Europeans to partition the region.

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